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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the community-based resources that may be available to regular and special education teachers serving visually impaired students in rural areas. It notes the national shortage of teachers qualified to teach children with visual impairments and suggests that rural teachers will have to devote some effort to seeking out appropriate educational resources. Communicating with the community can uncover resources useful in transitional training that involves daily living skills, job training, or job placement. Procedures for the productive use of volunteers and volunteer organizations are considered, and local cooperatives are recommended as potential sources for employment experience. The report concludes that ready-made resources for visually impaired students are unlikely to exist in rural areas and that regular and special education teachers will need to create them. A table identifies local/community and regional/county organizations and personnel that currently exist in some settings or that might be created to provide services in the areas of employment, family support and advocacy, recreation, social and interpersonal development, and medical or financial needs. A second table lists addresses and phone numbers for national organizations that focus on the education of visually impaired and blind students. (RAH)

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RESOURCING VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN RURAL SETTINGS

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Community-based services for children who are blind or visually impaired, because they are low incidence "... are virtually absent in more sparse settled areas..." (Kirchner & Aiello, 1985, p.232). This forces the discussion of accessing community resources to be one of location and creation in the "community" in a broader sense.

Prefatory to accessing resources is understanding the meaning of "community." In the rural the closest town may be miles away, and the town may be nothing more than an intersection in the highway. Therefore, the local community will be defined to include the nearest town. There are also resources that can be developed or accessed at the county seat with concerted effort. You will often have to be aggressive and persistent to get what you need to serve your visually impaired (VI) students. For very young children most resources are available through health and human services organizations. As children grow older, age 3+, there will be greater involvement with the educational establishment. Most of the educational programs which children with special needs would require are federally mandated, and school districts must provide services.

Accessing Resources - Regular Education Teachers

Other than minimum services, the child with a visual impairment should have access to all of the school related services which are available to other students. In a rural community it is probable that the regular education teacher will assist in providing educational services to all students, including those with visual impairments. Due to the low incidence of visual impairment, as compared to other handicapping conditions, the chances of a community hiring its own teacher of the visually impaired is unlikely. In fact, throughout the nation, there is a shortage of teachers qualified to teach children with visual impairments (Parsons, 1986). With these statements in mind, it is conceivable that one of the roles of the regular education teacher will be to seek out resources for a student with a visual impairment.

For a regular education teacher the very first place that she/he should go for resource assistance for an identified child with VI would be the special education department within the school district, or special education cooperative, that is responsible for the child's education. School districts are required to provide necessary services to all students with disabilities. These services may include, depending on the severity of the student's disability, an itinerant teacher certified in the area of visual impairment, an orientation and mobility specialist, an occupational therapist, and/or physical therapist. To determine which, if any, of these services are necessary the regular education teacher will need to contact the appropriate diagnostic personnel utilized in the district. Which particular resource provides this service will depend on the individual state. Contacting the state residential school for children with visual impairments will also provide the teacher with many answers, and suggested agencies to call. The regular education teacher may have to help identify resources that will be written into the IEP if the district does not provide specialist assistance.

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To tap resources in the community that could assist the regular education teacher in providing services to children with visual disabilities, the teacher should try to tap the community resources in Table 1 which indicates sources and types of services. Read the type of service key at the bottom of the table to determine the types of services which may be provided.

Being a member of the community will give any teacher an "edge" to getting services, funding, and/or equipment for students. Regular education teachers need to realize the value of people when teaching a child with a visual impairment. Volunteer workers can become readers for taping material, or can read directly to the student if information is not available in large-type or print. Volunteers can also provide a "sighted-guide" for a student with severe enough vision loss to necessitate assistance in travel for field trips and community- based activities. Volunteers are readily accessible through churches, and other social agencies within a community. Older citizens and retirees are valuable resources for a teacher to utilize.

Accessing Resources - Special Education Teacher

Although the special education teacher would be more familiar with special needs populations, it is probable that his/her experience with students having visual impairments is limited due to the low incidence of children with visual impairments. Most college courses in special education do not train specifically in the area of visual impairment (Knowlton, 1987). In fact, there are only 30 college or university level programs across the country with specific degree programs in blindness and visual impairment (College Board Press, 1993).

Still and all, it would be the special education teacher in most schools that would deal with specific issues arising in services for a student with a visual impairment. The special education teacher, too, should utilize community resources, specifically its people, to assist in providing services to the child. They may also be assisted by organizations such as those listed in Table 2.

The special education teacher should request that the district purchase subscriptions to journals dealing with visual impairments, as an on-going resource for information and teaching strategies. These journals include: The Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness and R.E.: View. Even if an itinerant teacher of the visually impaired is contracted to help in educating the student, it is the district's special educator who will provide most of the teaching. The reason for this is simple, the itinerant teacher travels a large area to serve students. Most of these areas are rural and for logistical reasons the teachers often cannot get to a student more than once, or maybe twice a week, for an hour or so each time. Knowing the special educator will be the primary teacher for the student is reason enough for the district to provide time and travel for this teacher to attend training sessions in many aspects of teaching the student with visual impairments. Some of these areas may include: orientation and mobility, braille computer systems, adapting the environment, and adapting the curriculum. A good resource for this training would be the state school for the blind or any of the resources listed in Table 2. Once the special educator has been trained, she/he can share his/her new knowledge with other teachers in the district.

TABLE 1

Community/Local Resources

Existing*

Coops, Grange (E)
Recreational opportunities (R)
Chamber of Commerce (F, E)
Tourist Bureau (R, E)
Coummunity service groups (F,E)
Telephone Book (E, F, R, S)
Newspaper (E, F, R, S)
Area Shopper (Shop & Swap) (E, F, R, S)
Church groups (F, R, S)
Community Recreation Programs (R, S)
Activity groups (Scouts, FFA, Etc.) (R, S)
Public Schools (F.S.)
Job Training Partnership Act (E)
Lodges/societies (VFW, Lion, etc.) (E, R, S)

Potential to be Created

Counselors in the community for families and siblings (F, S)
Career counseling/Career Education (E)
Local Funding Sources (F, E, R, S, M,)
Volunteer programs for:
Mobility training (E,S)
Transportation (E, S)
Business to provide supported employment, transition and life-skills (E)
Self-help groups (S, R, F)

County/Regional Resources

Social Service Agencies (M)
Public Health & Professional Medical Agencies(M)
Universities (F)
BOCES (or equivalent intermediate units) (E)
Children's Hospital (M)
United Way county office (M, F, R, E),
Regional Hospital (M)
Social Services Dept. (M, F)
Guidance Center (M, F)
Legislators (E, R, M)
Ministerial Alliance (F)
Residential Programs (F, S)
Apprenticeship program (E)
Regional job accommodation network (E)
Regional job development personnel (E)
Pool of mentors/Role models (R, S)
Regional peer telephone bridges (S)
Regional parent network (F)

Types of Services Potentially Available

E=Employment
F=Familial support and advocacy
R=Recreation
S=Social/Interpersonal development
M=Medical, financial and other social servi

*Known to exist in some settings

Table 2

EDUCATION

Exceptional Teaching Aids
20102 Woodbine Ave.
Castro Valley, CA 94546
1-510-582-4859

American Printing House for the Blind
P.O. Box 6085
Louisville, KY 40206-0085
1-502-895-2405
1-800-223-1839

Communication Aids for Children Crestwood Company
6625 N. Sidney Place
Milwaukee, WI 53209
1-414-352-5678

Recording For the Blind
20 Roszel Road
Princeton, NJ 08540
1-609-452-0606

National Braille Press
88 St. Stephen Street
Boston, MA 02115
1-617-266-6160

Seedlings... Braille Books for Children
P.O. Box 2395
Livonia, MI 48151-0395
1-800-777-8552

National Federation of the Blind
1800 Johnson Street
Baltimore, MD 21230
1-410-659-9314

Linda Burkhart
8503 Rhode Island Ave.
College Park, MD 20740
(designs for teacher made adaptive switches)

National Library Services
for the Blind and Physically Handicapped
1291 Taylor Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20542
1-202-707-5100

Taping for the Blind
3935 Essex Lane
Houston, TX 77027
1-713-622-2767

Association for Education and Rehabilitation
for the Blind and Visually Impaired
206 N. Washington Street,
Suite 320
Alexandria, VA 22314
1-703-548-1884

Part of the job duties of the special educator is to provide transitional training for the older student. This training could involve daily living skills, such as cooking, cleaning, clothing care, and banking. Community businesses, such as laundromats, small restaurants, apartments, motels, etc. can all be accessed to provide equipment and materials for functional living skills training in "real" settings.

As the student with a visual impairment reaches employment age the responsibility of job training and job placement will most likely become the duty of the special educator. Transition services (to assist in moving from school into the job market) should be available in all schools, and are at least hypothetically available in 30+% of rural schools as well (Beard, Montgomery, & Bull 1991). In many rural communities the co-op is the largest employer and therefore a potential source of job training, transitional placement or permanent employment for students, disabled and

non-disabled. The Chamber of Commerce, with their contacts in the business world, can also be a valuable resource for job training or employment. The state Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) office can often provide funds for job training. Local businesses can receive special tax credits for hiring students with disabilities.

Community/Local Resources

Existing/potential resources: Community/local resources are listed in Table 1. Not all may be available in a particular rural community, but they can be developed by teachers who are willing to network and to work on their development. Almost all developed community resources which focus on the child who is blind or visually impaired were begun by a single parent or teacher who had a need. This person reached counselors in the community who deal with the needs of the families and siblings of persons who are blind or visually impaired. Counselors need training in this area and, usually only a few can deal adequately with the needs of relatives of the handicapped in general and the blind or visually impaired in particular.

At the same time that support relationships are being developed, other kinds of services can be developed. One successful strategy is volunteer programs. Commitment with the development of volunteer programs comes the development of funding resources to support the programs.

At the local level there is a greater opportunity and need for transitional placement if the student is to remain in the community. To stay in the community the student must obtain appropriate career counseling/career education. Higher education, vocational technical education, and career education are most likely to be supported and financed through Vocational Rehabilitation, Visual Services or Vocational Technical Programs. Employment training can be supported by JTPA or similar mechanisms in which members of local businesses provide semi-supported employment and apprenticeship programs. Many rural public schools can develop programs toward that goal. Concomitant to this are the development of independent living and life skills programs. Sometimes these programs are available through a high school or vocational technical school, but usually, they are provided by volunteer groups, sometimes affiliated with a sheltered employment setting. This particularly is true if the students are multihandicapped.

County Level Resources

Possible county level resources are listed in Table 1. Existing resources at the county level should be pursued in the same manner as those available at the local level. If the community is both rural and remote you will probably conduct most of the contact in writing.

Existing Resources: County level resources are more or less available at the county seat. In most states, offices of state agencies, Human Services, Health Departments, Guidance Centers, and Vocational Rehabilitation are located in each county; in highly populated areas, with resident representatives available five days a week. In sparsely populated areas, traveling nurses,

counselors, or representatives may be available weekly, bimonthly, or by request and appointment. The population of the county seat is not as crucial to the availability of services as the proportion (or raw numbers) of county residents below the poverty line. Poverty tends to draw higher levels of service on the basis that it is the volume of potential clients which leads to staffing accommodations.

At a large (population 20,000+) county seat, you could expect to find hospitals and human/family services. Hospitals, which can provide services for children, may include a public health and professional medical agency. Sometimes there is access to optical aids, equipment and other resources which may be helpful to special needs populations. If the hospital is a regional hospital it may have a social service department. Be sure to explore hospital services carefully. A good source of information outside of the hospital chain is the head "Candy Striper," hospital social worker, or chaplain. These persons coordinate all hospital volunteers and usually know everything that is available and who to see to access it. The human/family services agency office is where information about funding resources for aids and equipment can be acquired. In the same line, there be a county office of the United Way/Community Chest which may be a source of funds for projects of equipment or a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). The BOCES will also have contact with a regional or state resource center which could provide optical aids, braille books, tapes and other resources. Finally, there might even be a university or a branch of a college which could provide both parent and teacher instruction as well as being a potential educational outlet for specific students. Most states have funded organizations for information and referral services for special needs children; local health or human services agencies can usually provide you with resource names and telephone numbers.

Potential Resources: At the county level we have an opportunity to create a variety of networks which would be beneficial to both students and caregivers. These might include a job accommodation network which would maintain a list of jobs that could be filled by students with varying degrees of visual impairments. Also given would be where and how training for these jobs could be obtained. If the client pool is large, a resource agency (e.g. social services) may even be talked into employing job development personnel who would service clients throughout the county. It is possible also to develop a telephone peer support group through which individuals with blindness or visual impairment of all ages can talk and discuss solutions for problems which are unique to their condition. Peer networks of students using phone bridges to connect more than two teens at the same time and pools of mentors or role models, can sometimes be developed which can serve to guide and support students in both academic and non-academic endeavors.

Communicating With the Community: There are a variety of ways in which you can communicate resource needs to the community at the local or county seat level. These include both personal and mass appeals. Personal appeals are usually made through talks to clubs or to groups of civic leaders, e.g., at Chamber of Commerce meetings. Many times what is needed is consciousness or awareness raising. Just getting your needs into the public view may be beneficial. Mass communication, such as on a local cable franchise, press releases to local/regional papers, or advertisements at a booth at the county fair will normally be seen by just about everyone in a rural county and can fill this need.

Developing Volunteer Programs

Programs that provide services are typically affiliated, at least loosely, with the public schools. Fund raising volunteer programs may be set up to work for a specific individual (Flanagan, 1981; MacBride, 1980). School volunteer programs are the most widely used, but volunteer programs do not have to be in the schools. Colleges or university with teacher training programs are a good resource for volunteers and advocates for children with special needs. Books which deal with school volunteer programs include: Carter & Dapper (1974), Cuninggim & Muligan (1979), National Rural Development Institute (1987), and U.S. Government Printing Office (1976).

Typically, almost half of a volunteer group is organizational and administrative, with the other half being direct service providers (Saccomorrel, 1983). There are many things that volunteers can do. Some want to work directly with students, others do not. Accommodating the preferences of the volunteers will help to retain more of them.

According to Flannagan (1981) every volunteer group that is to have an influence on the community should consist of at least a banker, a lawyer, a school board member, merchants, law enforcement officers, and politicians. There are two distinct type of people who should be recruited for a good volunteer program. The first are the workers who provide direct service. The others are those who will seek funding, support, and smooth the way for accomplishing the goals of the program. Recruiting ideas can be found in AARP (1982), and Finnan, Fafard & Howell, (1984).

Summary

Most local resources for students with VI need to be created, usually by regular and special education teachers. Some resources will be available through agencies which will at least appear regularly at the county seat. Assistance programs in rural schools are likely to, at best, be composed of volunteers and itinerant specialists. Either the regular teacher or the special education teacher, depending on access will provide the majority of services to the students with VI . Many possibilities for transition of students with VI are suggested but almost all must be developed by the teachers of the student with VI . Most resources in rural areas for students with VI are not available until a teacher or a parent create or locates them. The student with VI , like many other students with disabilities, in rural areas is a low incidence student. Therefore, finding readymade resources is unlikely.

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